Two Paths, One Ultimate Reality: Emptying through Buddhist Meditation and Focusing through Islamic Worship

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Introduction

Across the world's great spiritual traditions, seekers have employed different modes of practice to reach a singular goal: direct realization of an ultimate, unchanging reality. Although Buddhism and Islam appear at first to move in opposite directions—the former emphasizing *emptiness* and non-self, the latter emphasizing *remembrance of the Real* (al-Ḥaqq)—a deeper investigation reveals that both traditions converge upon the same existential aim: the dissolution of illusion and the unveiling of what is ultimate, unconditional, and uncreated.

In Buddhism, this unconditioned reality is articulated most clearly in *Udāna* 8.3, where the Buddha speaks of "the Unborn, the Unmade, the Unconditioned" (*ajātaṃ, abhūtaṃ, akataṃ, asaṅkhataṃ*). In Islam, the same ontological foundation appears in *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, which proclaims a divine reality that "neither begets nor is begotten" and is utterly incomparable to anything within creation (*laysa kamithlihi shay'un*).

By placing these two foundational texts side by side, we can see that both traditions affirm the existence of a reality beyond the changing universe, a reality that is beyond form, beyond duality, and beyond temporality. What differs is the method: Buddhist meditation proceeds through emptying and deconstruction of illusory layers of self, while Islamic worship (ʿibādah)—especially through dhikr, prayer, and surrender—proceeds through focusing, orienting, and remembering the Real.

This article explores how these two paths, though distinct in style and language, ultimately lead toward the same peak.

The Unconditioned Reality in Udāna 8.3

One of the most profound declarations in the Buddhist canon appears in *Udāna* 8.3:

"There is, monks, an Unborn, Unmade, Unoriginated, Unconditioned (*ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ*). If there were not this Unborn, Unmade, Unoriginated, Unconditioned, there would be no escape from what is born, made, originated, and conditioned."
— *Udāna* 8.3, PTS Ud 80

This short passage carries enormous metaphysical weight. It suggests that liberation (*nibbāna*) is not the annihilation of existence but the recognition of a dimension of reality that is not subject to becoming, not dependent on causes, and not bound by time.

The Buddha's language here is deliberately apophatic. Instead of describing what this reality *is*, he describes what it *is not*—not born, not made, not fabricated. In Buddhist phenomenology, whatever is conditioned (*saṅkhata*) is impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*). Therefore, if liberation is real, its ground must be unconditioned.

This is not “God” in an anthropomorphic sense, nor is it a personal creator. But neither is it nihilism. It is a statement that beyond the flux of phenomena lies an aspect of reality that is unchanging.

The Absolute Reality in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ

Islamic monotheism also begins by negating the limited and contingent. *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* is one of the most concise yet profound theological statements in world scripture:

“Say: He is Allah, the One.
Allah, the Self-Sufficient.
He neither begets nor is begotten.
And nothing is comparable to Him.”
— Qur’an 112:1–4

Here, the Absolute (*al-Ṣamad*) is defined by four essential characteristics:

He is One (*aḥad*).
He depends on nothing.
He is not subject to birth or becoming.
He is beyond any likeness.

This articulation is strikingly parallel to the apophatic structure of *Udāna* 8.3. Both reject origin, becoming, causation, and comparability at the level of ultimate reality. The Buddhist *asaṅkhata* and Qur’anic *al-Ṣamad* both name an unconditioned ground, though their metaphysical interpretations may differ.

Two Approaches to the Same Summit: Emptying and Focusing

Although the ontological foundations of both traditions align at a deep structural level, their spiritual methods differ dramatically.

Buddhist Meditation as Emptying

The Buddha’s path begins not with affirmation but with inquiry: What is the self? Is there anything in experience that is permanent, unchanging, or truly “I”?

Through mindfulness (*sati*) and insight (*vipassanā*), practitioners observe the impermanence and contingency of bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and consciousness. The more deeply one sees this flux, the more one recognizes that the “self” is a construction.

This process of deconstruction leads to what many Buddhist texts call *suññatā*—emptiness. Not non-existence, but the absence of inherent selfhood.

In this emptying, the illusory layers of *nāma-rūpa* dissipate, and the unconditioned reality—described in *Udāna 8.3*—becomes accessible.

Islamic Worship as Focusing and Remembering

Islamic spiritual practice moves in the opposite direction: instead of emptying the self, one orients the self toward the Real. The Qur’an repeatedly emphasizes *dhikr* (remembrance), *khushūʿ* (inner focus), and *tawḥīd* (unity):

“Remember Allah with much remembrance.”
— Qur’an 33:41

“Surely in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest.”
— Qur’an 13:28

Here, the human self is not negated but purified. Its illusions (*nafs ammārah*, the commanding ego; *nafs lawwāmah*, the self-reproaching soul) are tamed not by erasing identity but by aligning it with the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*).

Sufi literature, especially in Ibn ʿArabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, describes this process as transitioning from the ego-self (*nafs*) to the Real Self (*al-Ḥaqq*). Here, worship is a form of focusing—turning consciousness toward the ultimate ground of existence.

The Convergence: When Emptiness Meets the Real

Although the linguistic and theological frameworks differ, the experiential conclusions of both traditions converge.

Buddhism reaches the summit through *emptying*: dissolving selfhood until only the unconditioned remains.
Islam ascends through *orientation and remembrance*: purifying the self until it mirrors the Real.

The destination is the same: an ultimate reality that is unborn, uncreated, unconditioned, incomparable.

In Javanese mysticism, this convergence is beautifully captured in the concept of **suwung**—emptiness that is full, a void that is luminous, an absence that reveals presence. Suwung is both the Buddhist *suññatā* and the Sufi *fanā’* in a single breath. It is the point at which emptying and remembering become indistinguishable.

Approaching the Ultimate Reality: Paths of Practice

Buddhist meditation approaches the unconditioned through direct insight into the impermanent nature of experience, culminating in cessation (*nirodha*) and the realization of the Unborn.

Islamic worship approaches the Absolute through continuous remembrance, surrender (*islām*), and love (*maḥabbah*), culminating in the annihilation of ego (*fanā’*) and abiding in the Real (*baqā’*).

Both practices seek to dismantle illusion.

Buddhism dismantles the illusion of a permanent self.
Islam dismantles the illusion of separation from the Real.

Both aim toward the same horizon: a reality free from condition, birth, and becoming.

Conclusion

Whether one empties the self through meditation or fills the heart with remembrance through worship, the aim is the same: liberation from illusion and union with what is most real. The Buddha’s

declaration of the Unborn and the Qur'an's proclamation of the One both testify to an unconditioned reality as the foundation of spiritual awakening.

Emptying and focusing may appear as opposite methods, but they are two faces of one journey. Both paths lead beyond the conditioned universe toward the same summit: the realization of ultimate, unchanging, incomparable reality.

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